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WORKING PAPER N° 259

The Symbolic Universe of UKM: A Semiotic Analysis of the National University of Malaysia

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The Symbolic Universe of UKM: A Semiotic Analysis of the National University of Malaysia¹

Hans-Dieter Evers

“The point of view creates the object”
(Saussure 1966, cited by Bourdieu et al 1991:33)

“Penubuhan Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia...merupakan usaha gigih untuk menukarkan kebudayaan kolonial kepada kebudayaan nasional” (Prof. Ismail Hussein dalam Syarahan Perdana jawatan Profesor UKM, 30 Januari 1990)

1. Introduction: Cultural Symbols and Material Culture

National monuments are usually deliberately constructed as powerful symbols of national glory and national identity. The National Monument (Monumen Nasional or Monas), a tower on Freedom Square in Jakarta ², Soldiers storming up a hill to plant a flag in Kuala Lumpur, or the Brandenburger Tor in Berlin topped by the carriage of the goddess of victory are exhibits of the obvious. These symbols are made up of a multitude of signs that point to different aspects of the general message conveyed by the symbol. In these deliberately constructed symbols a certain consistency of signs can be expected. There will be chains of interrelated signs and symbols and an underlying meta-narrative (to use Lyotard's well-known concept) that gains in importance and becomes “authorised language” (Bourdieu 1991).

¹ A first draft of this paper was read at a staff seminar of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, National University of Malaysia, on 17 July 1996, while serving as Visiting Professor of Sociology in the university. I am grateful for comments received from the participants of the seminar.

² See Nas 1992:185 and MacDonald 1995 for a discussion of Monas as a national symbol. On the monuments of Surabaya see Lombard 1995.

If a government decides to put up a national monument or, as the case may be, intends to build not just a university, but a **national** university, it can be assumed that this intention will find expression in the way the campus is laid out, the buildings are constructed and the signs and symbols are chosen ³. Such a national building complex must therefore have a symbolic structure which intentionally provokes feelings, consciousness and behaviour of a particular kind⁴.

Any object of material culture can assume a meaning beyond the obvious utilitarian purpose. They can become signs or symbols, pointing to more or less complex dimensions of the world of meaning ("Sinnprovinzen" according to Alfred Schuetz) of a particular culture. Signs are communicative devices intentionally aiming to express something, symbols are more complex.

The process of semiosis, i.e. the production of signs which (according to Saussure's semiotics) include both the signifier and the signified, is thus defined as a social process, in which actors attach meaning to objects. In turn signs provoke social actions which confirm and strengthen the meaning of the sign. Symbols often are made up of a chain of related signs and refer to complex sets of meaning and provoke feelings, raise consciousness or influence behaviour, if not immediately so possibly in the future.

Social semiotics has, because of its linguistic ancestry stressed the power of words in the social construction of reality. Language is used in defining what is right or wrong, good or evil, beautiful or ugly. But as Bourdieu has stressed the power of words is the delegated power of the spokesperson (Bourdieu 1991:107). There is therefore "authorised language", which determines the discourse of politics, economics and culture. I would

³ Though the founding of UKM is analysed in detail by Mohd. Ali Kamaruddin (1981), the symbolism of the event has not attracted his attention.

⁴ For a discussion of the political aspects of symbolism see Ahonen 1993.

maintain, that the style and location of buildings is also “authorised” in both the immediate sense of given a building permit, but also in terms of what is allowed to be expressed in public and what meaning is allowed to be transmitted to the observer.

The following paper is an attempt to unravel the symbolism and the universe of meaning connected with the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the National University of Malaysia. It will be an exercise of “Verstehen” and of interpretation⁵ and not of survey research or history. The methodology of analysis will be borrowed from social and urban semiotics, phenomenology and post-modern social theory. As usual in such endeavours there is a strong subjective element, which I hope to compensate by drawing on many years of exposure to the academic culture of Southeast Asian universities, the comparative perspective gained in long-term field research and the assistance of a fair number of helpful actors in the field under study⁶.

⁵ A test whether staff and students share this interpretation and whether or not the buildings, monuments and signs convey the same meaning will not be presented for the time being.

⁶ I am particularly indebted to Shamsul A.B., Sharifa Saleha and Solvay Gerke for critical comments on this paper.

2. The Semiosis of UKM

Approaching UKM from the avenue leading to the campus a wooden kampung style guardhouse signals to the visitor: This is Malay territory ⁷. The area is clearly marked by fences and guarded entrances, like a military camp, a sacred area or a theme park. If the visitors attention is not detracted, as is usually the case, by two large buildings to the right and left he may have noticed a wall sporting the university's name and crest, otherwise there is no indication that this is the entrance to a university campus.

The first two large buildings set major markers to unravel the meaning of the well guarded and fenced off area, the mosque with its towering minaret and a heavy and powerful looking low building, the Dewan Cancellor Tun Abdul Razak. Malay cultural identity is forcefully portrayed by Islam and the Malay state, represented by the university's chancellor who is the Ruler of the State of Negri Sembilan ex officio and Tun Abdul Razak, a national hero, leader of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), former prime minister and father of the current Minister of Education.

Diagram 1, **Crest and Sign of UKM**



يُورِسِيَّتِي كِبَغْسَانِ مَلِيْسِيَا
UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA

⁷ This guard house was actually built several years after the university campus had been opened. This does not, however, contradict my main argument. Semiosis is a process, not necessarily a grand design.

Diagram 2, The Symbolic Universe of UKM

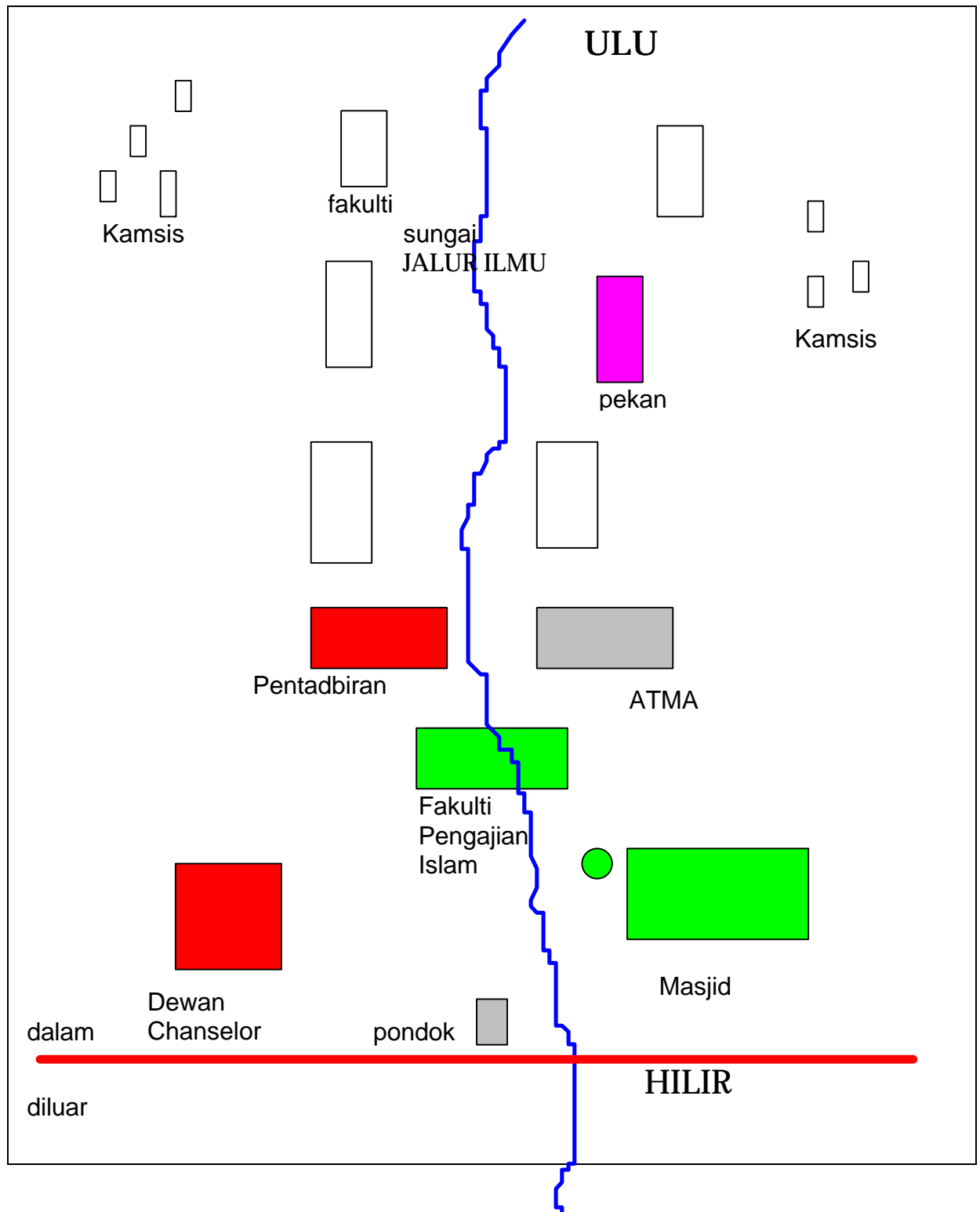


Table 1

An Inventory of UKM Symbols

Symbol	Signs	Location	Meaning	Domain
University Mosque	minaret, copula	right entrance to campus	Malay religious identity	religion: Islam
Dewan Chancellor		left entrance to campus	Connection to Malay royalty	state
Faculty of Islamic Studies	stilized Arabic doors, entrance	first faculty building	Malay religious identity, dakwah	religion: Islam
ATMA	none!	second facultybuilding	Malay cultural identity, adat, alam Melayu	ethnicity
Administrative building		just behind (!) the Faculty of Islamic Studies and ATMA	State, modernity	state
Faculty buildings and lecture theatres	red brick construction	along river	British university tradition	global: academic modernity
Student hostels	“Kamsis”, names	around faculty and other buildings	Malay kampung identity	ethnicity
Restaurants Pusanika	different pictures and decorations	central location	multi-culturalism	ethnicity
LESTARI, Computer Centre etc	post-modern style, pink colour	fringe area	modernity, ASEAN identity, wawasan 2020, NDP	global: post-modernity
River	“alur ilmu”	centre of campus	metaphor to connect Malay village life to modern science	tradition and modernity
Forest trail	entrance hut, pond, trees	leading away towards the fringe of the campus	rimba (virgin forest), culture versus wilderness	nature
Allocation of space: Campus plan	river, ring road, forest reserve	built along river, hulu hilir	simulation of Malay state, NEP	state
University crest	book, nuclear modell etc	university entrance, books, letter heads. Probably the most frequently displayed symbol	artificially constructed, following the British tradition	global: academic modernity

The Malay nation and Malay nationalism is forcefully represented by two of its most powerful symbols, mosque and ruler. There is no doubt that the visitor has entered a National university. National identity is, however, a Malay “*bumiputra*-defined identity that has privileged *bumiputra* culture as the ‘core’ of the Malaysian national identity while recognising, if peripherally, the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups” (Shamsul 1996:426).

The first faculty building behind mosque and *dewan* houses the Faculty of Islamic Studies, followed closely by the Institute of Malay Civilisation and the Malay World (ATMA) and the University Administration (Pentadbiran). The symbolic universe of the entrance area is repeated: religion, culture and state, i.e. Islam, adat and negara create a triangle of Malay identity. To be a Malay a person has to be a Muslim, follow Malay custom including speaking Bahasa Melayu and pledge allegiance to the Malay ruler.

The theme symbolised by the Malay kampung-style guard house at the university entrance is pursued further in the arrangements of buildings, roads and facilities. As a matter of fact the whole spatial plan can be interpreted as a symbol of adat, of the Malay way of life (Evers 1977) ⁸.

The idealtyp of Malay traditional culture and the Malay state was spatially tied to rivers and estuaries. Villages were strung along the great rivers of the Malay Peninsula or other areas of the Alam Melayu, the Malay world. The hub of Malay Civilisation was the estuary (*kuala*) and the lower part of the river (*hilir*), were long-distance trade and inter-island shipping originated. Further upriver (*ulu*) civilisation receded, paddy production

⁸ Gottdiener 1995:138 uses the term “spatial semiotics” for this kind of analysis. See also Evers 1993, Korff 1993 and Nas 1992 for a discussion of urban semiotics.

became sparse, rough slash-and-burn agriculture and raw materials and forest products dominated economic life. *Hilir* and *ulu* became associated with *halus* (refined) and *kasar* (rough, down-to-earth, even uncivilised). This model has a long history. The ancient Malay states in Borneo followed this pattern, as did the more recent state of Johore in its shifting locations on the islands of Riau and the Johore river. Though modern Malaysia has, indeed, moved away from this pattern, Malayness and Malay statehood is still symbolically tied to riverine living.

UKM has been constructed in the image of Malay civilisation. Other universities have been built on hills, like Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang or on flat ground like Universiti Pertanian not far from Bangi, the location of UKM. Though there was ample space available in the area some 30km south of Kuala Lumpur, where a university could have been built, a narrow valley was chosen and the university buildings were constructed on difficult terrain. Why else, if not to emulate the model of Malay life were the main buildings placed in a narrow valley along a small river! The faculty buildings, the library, the student cafeteria and shopping centre (*Pusanika*) were all arranged along the small stream, following intentionally or not an order of symbolic relevance. Downstream (*hilir*) we find esoteric subjects like Islam and Malay Civilisation, then social sciences and humanities, then economics and further up-stream the “hard” sciences and other down-to-earth subjects like geology. Whatever the faculty members might think about the scientific relevance and status of their disciplines, the symbolic order of things is constructed in the image of the Malay world.

The river itself is called *Alur Ilmu* (Stream of Knowledge) and signboards admonish students and staff “not to through rubbish into the Stream of Knowledge”, an admonition which is hopefully followed both regarding the river as well as lectures and term papers. While the Stream of Knowledge is still strong in the *ulu* (up-stream) of the hard sciences and flows swiftly

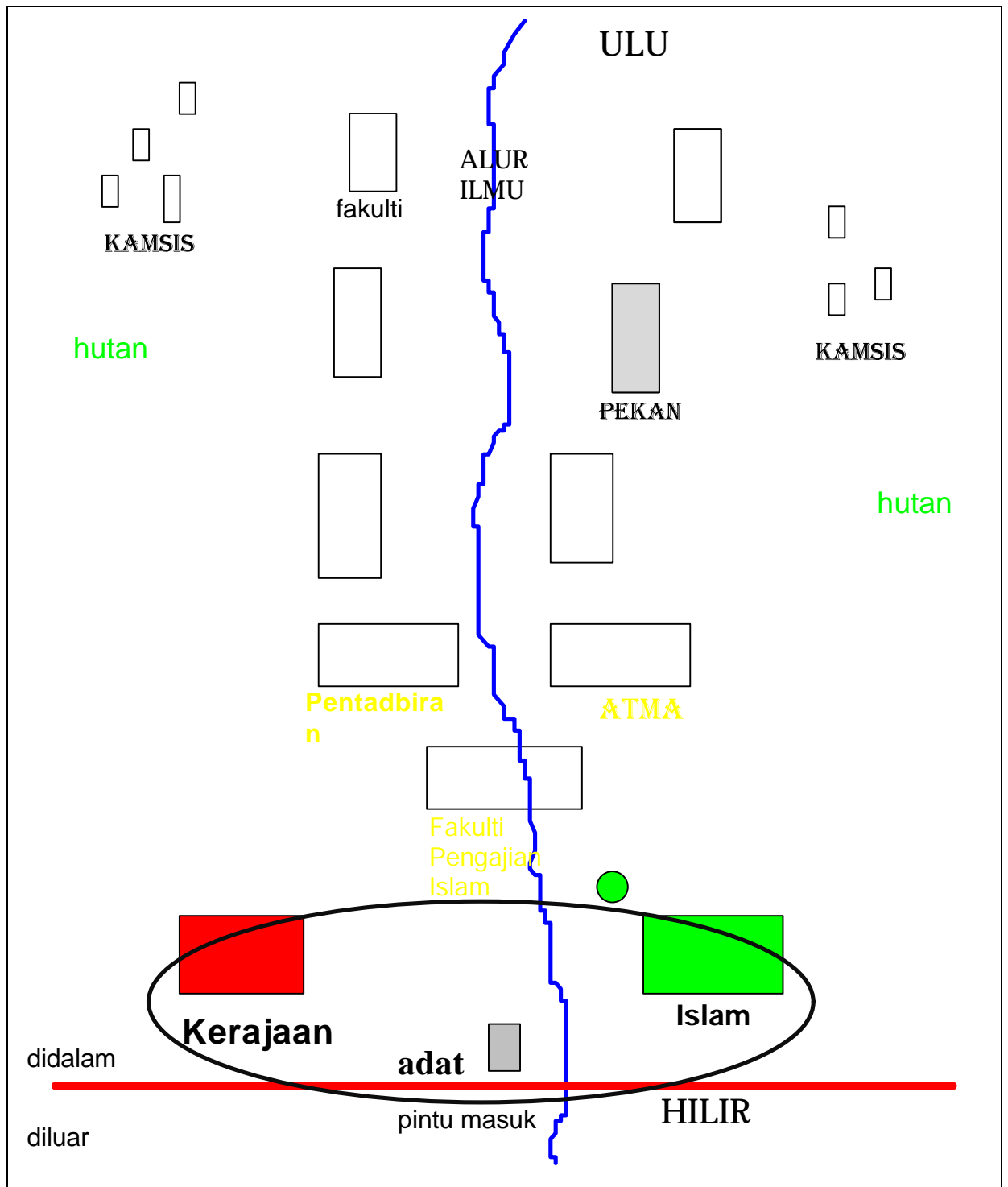
under the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, it is almost dried up when it reaches the Institute of Malay Civilisation and the Faculty of Islamic Studies - undoubtedly only a coincidence explainable by geomorphology and definitely not a meaningful symbol!

Surrounding the faculty buildings are students hostels, for which a symbolically meaningful term has been deliberately invented, namely Kamsis (shortened form of *kampung siswa*, literally student villages). The older part of the campus, built around 1970 symbolises a *kampung*. Though the hostels are modern buildings with no closely resemblance of Malay village houses, at least the acronym is a representation of the underlying meaning.

The symbolic allusion to Malay *kampung* life also explains the location of the campus far from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. A national institution with strong Malay identity could not be located, at that time anyway, in a predominately Chinese populated and culturally determined city, but had to show its roots in Malay rural culture. An alternative explanation, using a political economy approach could point out that land speculation was a factor in the location of the campus. Though no detailed information on this point is available, I suggest that land speculation has probably started as soon as the location of the university and the nearby town of Bandar Baru Bangi became known. The campus, however, is located on a former forest reserve, which made it necessary to resettle the *orang asli* (tribal) population living in that area. The political economy of national monuments would certainly be an interesting topic to study, but in the case under scrutiny social semiotics appear to yield more satisfactory results.

Diagram 2

The Symbolic Triangle Islam, Adat, State



3. Symbols of Modernity: Redbrick Faculties

The signification of the Malay world has, however, another dimension. UKM is, after all, no museum or theme park, but an institution of higher learning. The faculty buildings and lecture theatres themselves are “modern”, and in most cases concrete and brickwork has been used for their construction. The bricks are red and symbolically connect UKM with the colonial past. In Britain, after all, the term “redbrick university” was invented to designate the difference between new provincial universities and the old colleges of Oxford and Cambridge⁹. Academic events like convocations, inaugural lectures and senate or faculty meetings closely follow British practises. While the Malay language is used throughout, the procedures, the pomp and ceremony, the academic robes, and even the university crest all follow British standards. Even the curricula and the research is part of a globalised academic culture with hardly any particular reference to the Malay world, that is symbolically constructed in the physical outlay of the campus. Institutions like ATMA, the Institute of Malay Civilisation and the Malay World or the Department of Malay Language and Literature can also be found in European universities.

4. Minor Signs and Symbols

In addition to the spatial structure of the campus and the buildings, all of which, as we have seen, exhibit meaning, there are many minor signs, icons and symbols to be found. The building of the Faculty of Islamic Studies is adorned by windows whose concrete slabs are curved in such a way to resemble Arab forms of architecture.

⁹ A critical reader of this paper remarked, that bricks were the cheapest and most suitable building materials that could be used for the construction of faculty buildings. Whether this assumption is true or not could not be established, but is, after all, irrelevant to the argument here. Many people have contributed to the design of the university, but I found it remarkable that eventually a semiotically meaningful construct emerged.

Eating has ritual meaning in most societies and it can be expected that the cafeteria and restaurants exhibit at least some minor symbols. As a matter of fact the main students dining hall is about the only place, where the multiethnic composition of the student body is recognised. Malay style pondok with some Islamic ornaments, a Thai and an Indian food corner, a sort of Chinese pre-cooked food counter and a Western fast food restaurant serving globalised junk food cater to students' taste and symbolise Malaysian rather than Malay culture. The romance of Malay kampung life is, however, beautifully portrayed in a painting, adorning the wall of the cafeteria La Riz, which also depicts Swiss mountainscapes and serves colourful cakes, nasi lemak and assorted pastries.

5. The end of the neo-classical era and the dawn of the future

So far we have discussed the semiosis of UKM, when it was planned and constructed in the 1970s. Now UKM is expanding. New buildings, like the Faculty of Education, follow a style common in Southeast Asia. The buildings are modern, but the roofs are shaped in a particular way symbolising a generalised ASEAN identity. The shape of the roofs resembles a Southeast Asian peasant house in a highly stylised form. It is neither Malay nor Minangkabau nor Javanese or Thai, but it has become an icon resembling cultural forms recognised by all. The other genre of buildings has a post-modern touch. The shape of the building and its architectural features are variable, the colour is invariably pink and the ornaments or symbols are devoid of meaning. The entrance to the new Institute of Environmental Research LESTARI and the Computer Centre, both very post-modern institutions indeed, is topped by a circle with nothing in it. Pure form represents a virtual reality devoid of immediate meaning.

Modernity, a breaking with the past is the generalised message of these new structures.

6. Conclusion

The National University of Malaysia was planned and built in the 1970s as an assertion of Malay identity in a new state swamped by migrants, threatened by insurgents and dwarfed by powerful neighbours. "The establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia...was an attempt to change the prevalent colonial culture into a culture more national in character. UKM emerged simultaneously with the move to strengthen the National Culture Policy which was to be based on the indigenous tradition of the region" (Hussein 1993:9). UKM was to become symbol of national culture in the course of what Shamsul has called Malaysia's bureaucratic management of identity (Shamsul 1996:428). This national policy has, however, privileged "Malay *bumiputra* culture as the 'core' of the Malaysian national identity while recognising, if peripherally, the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups" (Shamsul 1996:426).

Symbols are used to either create or draw on the "world of meaning", the "cultural capital" of the Malay world (*alam Melayu*). French and Dutch structuralists, among others Claude Levy-Strauss and P.E. de Josselin de Jong, have already pointed out that oppositions and dualism enhance meaning. In our case the symbolic triangle Islam, Adat and ruler symbolised by buildings, names and locations is a reoccurring figuration on the UKM campus. On the other hand the academic part of the symbolic universe of UKM is derived from the British model and has been globalised and integrated into the international world of learning, dominated by the power of US-American and to a lesser extent European and Australian science, research and media corporations. In the last phase of construction work, currently undertaken on the campus, the symbolism of the Malay world has been given up and are replaced by signs and styles taken from either Southeast Asian or post-modern symbolic repository. Is the

symbolism of UKM as a Malay national institution fading and will the original symbolic universe become an empty shell devoid of meaning? Will UKM hold on to its earlier vision or succumb to the shift of Malaysian cultural politics? According to the plans of the Minister of Education the university will be “corporatized” and a corporate culture is expected to emerge ¹⁰. The vision for the coming century (Wawasan 2020) is not one of resurrecting the glorious past of the Malay state, but for the Malaysian multi-ethnic business elite to become a powerful player in a global market. It is a vision of a technology driven market economy, which was revealed by Prime Minister Datuk Sri Mahathir in 1994 to the Malaysian Business Council, not to UMNO, the political party that has championed Malay political rights and Malay cultural identity. The impressive symbolism of the Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur, currently the highest building on earth, signifying in its dual structure the ruthlessness of competition in a free market economy as two companies from Japan and Korea competed in building one tower each and reaching the top level first. Market expansion and a free market economy are primary development goals. The policy of redistribution of capital assets to Malays, instituted in the NEP (new economic policy) is still continued at a slower pace, but the emphasis on Malay cultural identity is replaced by modernity as the major semiotic theme in Malaysia’s domains of meaning (Evers 1996).

¹⁰ See the study of Boyly 1993 on the semiosis of corporate culture and its consequences.

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